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ABSTRACT

A classroom research project in English-as-a-Second-Language vocabulary development, conducted in an English language school in Brazil, is described. The study had two major aims: to help students build a large lexicon for future use, and to encourage students to be responsible for their own learning by teaching strategies for learning vocabulary. The subjects, 12 intermediate-level students, were first asked to rate their oral performance and vocabulary, and then took a 20-item test on words they would soon encounter in their text. Based on results, activities were selected that would provide opportunities to use vocabulary items naturally for communicative purposes. These included: a game in which each student defines a word and all students are asked to match words with definitions; dictionary use exercises; a bingo game using word stems; a word exchange; description of pictures; creation of "family" groups of students, who must communicate with one another and among themselves; individual retention and study exercises; crosswords and word puzzles; and identification or matching games. Students were again asked to rate their vocabulary and oral performance, and were post-tested for vocabulary gain. Results show some gain in vocabulary and confidence, but not sufficient to fully develop student skills. (MSE)

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ED 371 606

# 1. VOCABULARY TEACHING: A WAY TO IMPROVE LEARNERS' FLUENCY

by Jane Mello Vianna

## 1) My teaching situation

I work for the Sociedade Brasileira de Cultura Inglesa,which is one of the largest English teaching institution in Rio de Janeiro,Brazil. There are 21 branches including two in Brasilia and there are about 25.000 students altogether.
Besides teaching the English language, it promotes other aspects of the British culture. Moreover it encourages teachers to observe and reflect on their own teaching practice in order not only to help on their professional improvement but also to understand their students'needs.

## 2) Why this project

Based on this support I decided to carry out this project on vocabulary.
I noticed that my students did not feel confident to speak English. There were a lot of hesitations, fumbling for words, use of and interference from their mother tongue It was not unusual to meet learners who could understand English quite well but who had great difficulty in producing spoken language.
As I have observed that most of my students lacked a wide store of words I wondered about the possible reasons for this situation. First, vocabulary has not received the attention it deserves in the last few years. Teachers tended to see vocabulary as a supporting tool to the teaching of other skills. They believed that the students would build their vocabularies on their own as they engaged in other activities.As teachers tended not to consider vocabulary teaching important students then were accustomed to see it in the same way and so express meanings in a simple way. They wanted to communicate their message fluently without worrying about the quality of their own vocabulary.However,it is known that the further students progress the more they need to learn large numbers of words in order to have a more sophisticated vocabulary.
On the other hand,recent research into vocabulary has stressed its importance for English language teaching and reassessed the ways in which vocabulary is taught and learnt. It is now clear,for example, that the acquisition of vocabulary is just important as the acquisition of grammar and both deserve the same amount of attention from teachers.
Then, the situation in Brazil is not beneficial for the students' English learning process as they do not use the target language to communicate outside Cultura Inglesa. That is,they have few opportunities to use English naturally.

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Therefore, I conducted this project in order to see if my intermediate students could become more competent language users if they were exposed to a large number of new words and also had more opportunities to manipulate and attempt to use them. With this project, I had two major aims: one was to help my students build up a large store of words which would make future language use go more smoothly. The other aim was to help them to become independent, responsible for their own learning by teaching them some strategies for learning vocabulary. I believe that by teaching some strategies for vocabulary learning and also by helping the learners meet words in varied contexts and use them to express (new) ideas provide the most important opportunities for vocabulary learning.

I know that my research has not been exhaustive. I am aware that I have missed relevant aspects of the process and that the level of complexity of classroom reality is enormous. However, I strongly believe that this research has contributed to my general awareness of the multiplicity of factors involved in project work and - more importantly - in classroom teaching and learning.

3) Project design

The following steps are the ones that I went through while carrying out this project.

| STEPS | RATIONALE |
|---|---|
| 1) elicit students' perception | to check if their perceptions of their vocabulary and oral skill were the same as mine. |
| 2) pre-test | to check the number of words they already knew. |
| 3) pedagogic activities | to practise the vocabulary presented to them and provide opportunities to use English for communication. |
| 4)elicit students'perception | to check whether their own perceptions of their vocabulary and oral ability had changed. |
| 5) post-test | to check wether there was an increase rate or not. |

I want now to turn to a more detail analysis of what I have outlined above

1) ELICITING THE STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

At the beginning of the project the students were asked to rate both their oral performance and vocabulary by answering the following questionnaire.

1) How do you rate the quality of your vocabulary?

| poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

2) How do you rate your oral performance?

| poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | |

I know that it was not the best way of doing it because the question itself seemed to be rather loosely stated, however, I must acknowledge here that I talked about the questionnaire with the students in case there were any terms that they might have not understood.

Then the students rated the following.

1) How do you rate the quality of your vocabulary?

| student | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | V | | |
| 2 | | V | | |
| 3 | | V | | |
| 4 | V | | | |
| 5 | | V | | |
| 6 | | V | | |
| 7 | V | | | |
| 8 | V | | | |
| 9 | | V | | |
| 10 | | V | | |
| 11 | | V | | |
| 12 | V | | | |

2) How do you rate your oral performance?

| student | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | V | | | |
| 2 | | V | | |
| 3 | | V | | |
| 4 | V | | | |
| 5 | V | | | |
| 6 | V | | | |
| 7 | | V | | |
| 8 | V | | | |
| 9 | V | | | |
| 10 | | V | | |
| 11 | | V | | |
| 12 | V | | | |

By analysing their answers to the questionnaire, it can be seen that only four students rated their vocabulary "poor" while the other students rated it "average". As I did not know whether this "average rate" had a positive connotation or not, I decided to talk with them in order to find out the answer. Then, they said that although they did not consider their vocabulary the worst problem, they believed that they also needed to improve it because they knew that sometimes they lacked words to express their ideas both clearly and fluently.Although they were not totally happy with the quality of their vocabulary, this average rate did not have a negative connotation for them. After this, they said that they did not feel confident about their oral skills and they thought that sometimes they were unable to put their vocabulary to productive use.This can be confirmed by their answers to the questionnaire. While 7 students rated their oral performance "poor", the other 5 students rated their oral performance "average". They said that although they knew they could communicate in English, they did not feel so confident when producing spoken language.

Thus, based both on the students'perception and on my own perception of the situation, I went for vocabulary work though their answers suggested that most of the students did not consider their lack of vocabulary a serious problem and that this lack could interfere in their oral production in a negative way.

2) PRE-TEST

I gave them a 20 item vocabulary test to see if they had already had any previous contact with the new words that would come up in their books (see aapendix). Each item consisted of a sentence requiring the use of one of the target words.These words were chosen according to the topics of their book, John and Liz Soars, Headway Intermediate, and words which could be more useful for them. However, it was not possible to present all the words related to a certain topic. Therefore, I tried to be very careful in selecting the items so that they were good representatives of those more frequent words in their books.

I know that multiple choice questions were not the best option because they were restrict samples of words related to the topics. Besides this, multiple choice tests may not be reliable because students may answer it randomly. Consequently, the result of the test may not reflect the students' real range of their vocabulary. However, it was more practical to have it since I did not want to spend time in class with this type of activity. It tested a good number of words in a short time and allowed learners to make use of whatever knowledge they had of the meaning of a word.

In general the results of the test at the beginning of the term were good. They are the following:

BEFORE THE PROJECT

| students | right | wrong |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 11 | 9 |
| 2 | 12 | 8 |
| 3 | 7 | 13 |
| 4 | 10 | 10 |
| 5 | 9 | 11 |
| 6 | 13 | 7 |
| 7 | 13 | 7 |
| 8 | 9 | 11 |
| 9 | 9 | 11 |
| 10 | 9 | 11 |
| 11 | 9 | 11 |
| 12 | 10 | 10 |

I believe that these results were good due to the frequency of the words and because they seemed to be good representatives of those useful words for the students.

3) PEDAGOGIC ACTIVITIES

Based on the students' answers at the diagnostic stage I selected activities which could provide them with opportunities both to practise and use the items naturally for communication. It's worth saying that if the right kind of exposure to words and opportunities to practise these words are provided, there will be a chance that students will learn and remember most of the words.
The first type of activity presented to the students was to give them opportunities to practise the vocabulary and enhance retention of this new vocabulary. They were more controlled activities which gave learners little choice in what to say.

1) STUDENT DEFINITIONS At first an area of vocabulary is chosen. Then each student think of a word in the chosen area of vocabulary. They write it on a piece of paper and give it to the teacher to check and keep. Afterwards, each student writes a definition of their word on a clean piece of paper. It must not contain the word so they use X instead of the word itself. After the teacher has checked their definition, they put it on a table for everyone to see. Then, tthe teacher gives a word back to the students, making sure no one gets their own word. Everyone stands up and mills round the table. They have to match the word they have with its definitions.
In this activity the students have the opportunity to guess the correct word from the definitions they are presented. It does not matter if more than one person chooses the same word. It is interesting, then, to see who has got the correct answer.
My purpose here was to give the students a chance to meet new words and practise them in an interesting way.

Then, I used some activities with the dictionary. It is known that the dictionary provides one of the best resources for students who need to increase their vocabulary. By using the dictionary, I help my students to lose the fear that they may have when faced with the amount of information a dictionary contains and I may also train the students to understand that information.

2) CALL MY BLUFF At first students are asked to form groups of 3 ( or any other possible division) players each. Each group has got a monolingual dictionary. They have to select one word from the dictionary which they will be unknown to the rest of the class. Within each group one player should then write down a correct definition of the word (copied from the dictionary), while the other players write down "false" definitions. Then, the groups are paired to play the game. Group A tells group B the word they have chosen and each player in group A reads out his\her definition of the word. Each player in group B judges which definition is correct, and which are bluffs. The members of group B tell their choice to group A. If they have chosen the correct answer group B wins 4 points. However, if they have chosen the wrong one, they lose 4 points. Afterwards, group B tells group A the word they have chosen and the game continues.
While group A and B are playing together, the other groups are also doing the same thing.

3) STENGO It is a variation of vocabulary bingo that is specially designed to teach word stems. It is a game for previewing the meaning of the roots of words and increasing the students' vocabulary.
Before playing the game, I give the students as a homework assignment a list of word stems which they are going to practise by finding for each of the stems a word that includes that stem. The next class I hand out vocabulary bingo sheets - sheets with 16 large squares as shown below. At the top of each square write a stem, leaving space beneath for the students to write in 3 words using that stem. For the first 15 minutes of class, have students work in pairs to write in 3 words for each stem. Encourage the teams to make use of dictionaries. Once the teams have completed their sheets, use an overhead projector or the blackboard to display a stem and two words using that stem. Elicit from the students the meaning of the stem and of the two words. If one of the teams has on its sheets the words you have given, it can check that square. When a team has four checks down, across or diagonally, it wins. It adds to the fun to have some sort of prize - an envelope that the winners can open to find they have won a coke, or some such thing.
What is particularly attractive about this game is that it generates interest in words, provide for use of the dictionary, and encourage communication between members of each team. It is an enjoyable game that helps students to develop vocabulary that will improve their speaking skills. This game is most effective when followed by a communicative activity that contextualizes the (difficcult) words practised in the

game. The students also have the chance to discover how a knowledge of stems can help them make guesses at the meanings of words they have never seen before.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| auto | dis | in | un |
| less | ful | able | y |
| ous | ive | ish | er |
| ness | ist | ity | ion |

4) VOCABULARY SHEETS At first I divide the class into groups. Then I give each student a sheet of paper and diffirent colour pens. Afterwards, I brainstorm the area(s) of vocabulary I want to work on, such as travel, food, people's description, sports etc.. Each group, then, chooses one of these areas (it does not matter if more than one group chooses the same area), and each person (or pair) in the group chooses a different subheading for that area.They write this at the top of their piece of paper, so if the area the group has chosen is the language of menus, the different headings could be meat, vegetables, starters, desserts, fish.
I give everyone time to write down as many words as they want on their sheet. If they do not know a word that they want, they can either look it up in a dictionary, or ask a peer or even the teacher. After this, everyone passes their sheet one place round and then works on the sheet they have been given by their neighbour. They must first read all the words on it and ask whoever wrote it about any words they do not know. Then, they can add any words they can think of. This process continues until they get their original sheet back. They look at their sheets and ask each other about any words that have been added that they do not understand or agree with.

These practice activities focusing on vocabulary items were followed by communication activities when the words that had been practised would be likely to be used in natural communication.

1)PICTURES
They are very useful because they can be used in different ways. A possible excercise is to give one member of each pair a picture and he must then describe his picture so that the other pupil will be able to reproduce the picture without seeing

it. Another way of doing this activity is the following: one partner selects one picture from a group of pictures and describes it to the other partner, who tries to recognise

as quickly as possible which picture is being described. Alternatively, one partner can think of a picture and the other must ask questions to discover which one it is. It is also possible to show to the students several different pictures, (they can be put on the teacher's desk) and they have to choose one of them and then they have to make up a story using the picture they have got. Preferably they have to include themselves in the story as well. This is a way to involve the students and try to have a real situation as much as possible in the classroom since they have to tell their stories to a partner.
Using pictures in class is very fruitful for teachers and students. They motivate the students and make them want to pay attention and want to take part. Also pictures contribute to the context in which the language is being used. All the pictures used by me along the term were based on the areas\topics that I had been working on with the students. Finally, I like using pictures in class because they may be used to promote speaking.

2)NEIGHBOURS At first I divide the class into roughly equal-sized groups of at least four, preferably five per group. Each group then forms itself into a family, or a group of relations living together. I tell them that all the families live on the same street. I give them time to decide who they are, their personalities, interests, feelings and attitudes towards the other people in their home. Each group takes a turn at "being" the family while the other groups watch. At this point I can ask the other groups to describe the family they have just seen. Then, I tell the class that the next door family in the house on their left have just moved in, and two of their family are going to visit them to welcome them. So two from each group go round to the next group on their left. They then play their own families and tell each other the new people they have met.

Besides giving them opportunities to practise and use the words in natural communication, I also taught them how to study and establish a firm foundation for the vocabulary building. It is known that learning strategies will radically affect the way in which they learn new words.
Therefore, in order to help my students with their new vocabulary retention, I taught them the following strategies which could make the learning of new words and phrases more effective.

1) FILING THE NEW WORDS The purpose of this strategy was to help learners to record and remember the words presented to them along the term.

I asked them to find a small box with about 250 plain cards in it. There were also 4 dividers so that they could have 5 separate sections in the box. When they encountered a new word or phrase, they had to write it on one side of a card, and on the other side they could have either a synonym or a translation and an example sentence in English. It was advisable that they should note down whether it was a noun, a verb, or an adjective, etc. The card then went into the first section of the box. After having about 15 cards in their boxes, they tested themselves whenever they had time at home. It could be either in the morning or before going to bed. It was really important to do it and be honest, as well. They had to look at one side of the card and try to remember what was on the other side. If they were correct, they moved the card into the next section of the box; if they could not remember what it meant, it stayed where it was. When they answered correctly about a word from the fifth section of the box, they could throw that card away because it was an evidence that they knew the word.
This technique helped the students to retain a large number of words and it was easy to implement. It also made students more responsible for their vocabulary building since most of the work was done at home, on their own. Strategies which learners can use independently of a teacher are the most important of all ways of learning vocabulary. For this reason it is worthwhile ensuring that learners are able to apply the strategies and that they get plenty of help and encouragement in doing so.

2) WORDS IN THE POCKET It may be said that the rationale for this strategy is the same for the one mentioned above. The students also worked independently of the teacher and they decided when to do it. They had the opportunity to work either on the most useful words for them or the words they had difficculty in remembering. It was a novel and interesting way of coping with vocabulary building.
The students chose and wrote down two or three words in a small piece of paper and then put the words in one of the pockets. They also had to write the meaning or translations and put them in another pocket.
Whenever they had time or opportunity to look at them, they had to pick one up and said either its meaning or a translation. If they could not remember it they were allowed to look at the paper in their other pocket in order to check the correct meaning or translation of that word.

The students thought this technique was both funny and interesting to do. They also stated that it helped them to retain those words that they knew they encountered or use productively less frequently.

These two strategies are useful because they help to speed up the vocabulary learning process. It is worth saying here that these techniques occupied only a small part of my language learning program and that I tried to place those words in a meaningful context after students had practised them in class. They had fluency activities as well, which provided them with the opportunity to use the new words in communication.

After students had opportunities both to practise and use the new items naturally, I attempted to give them one more chance to practise these items so that they would check for themselves which words they could easily remember and use and those words that, on the contrary, they were unable to remember.
Games are very useful and fruitful to be used at this revising stage. Students feel at ease besides making provisions for items to be recycled.

1) CROSSWORDS AND PUZZLES I use them to activate words that the students had learned both some time before and the ones that they had met along this term. These types of games are beneficial for the students because the students with an intellectual challenge. Furthemore, they are short enough to occupy a convenient space during the class period and require no time-consuming correction.

2) BLOCKBUSTER At first I put a grid of letters on the blackboard. The letters are the first of the words that I am going to give definitions for. Then, I divide the class in two teams and they play odd or even to see which group starts. I start saying the definitions and if a student knows what word it is, he shouts Blockbuster and then he gives the answer. If he is correct he gets a point for his team. This point is marked by his team's sign where the letter is. Because he has got the right answer, he has the right to choose a letter again. Although the group has the right to choose a letter the whole class can shout blockbuster. The student who says it first, - no matter which team he belongs to, - has the chance to give the answer. If the student, however, does not give the correct answer, any other student can try it. The aim of the game is to score four words across\down or diagonal. This is how the students get a real point. It's also part of the game to try to prevent the other group from getting points. The following examples is one of the several blockbusters I gave to my students.

hostel - a kind of very cheap hotel, esp. for students.

guest - a person who's staying in a hotel.

bed and breakfast - a nigth's lodging and brakfast in the following morning.

scenery - the view, landscape.

coach - a very comfortable bus, esp. inter-cities.

hovercraft - a kind of ship that moves over land and water.

journey - trip, esp. by sea.

caravan - Bre. for trailler.

lorry - Bre. for truck

double - for two persons.

squash - a kind of game played with a small ball, rackets in a 4-walled room.

nowadays - the same as at the present time.

rock - very big stone.

traffic - a lot of cars moving slowly.

pollution - dirt in the air or water.

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| H | G | B | S |
| C | W | H | J |
| I | C | D | S |
| N | T | R | P |

3) WRITTEN EXCERCISES I also provided my students with some written excersices because they are a way to encourage the students to revise the new vocabulary in an enjoyable and constructive way. they were used either in class or at home. I always provided them with the key so that they could have more autonomy.

4) PICTURES I used pictures to revise my students' vocabulary. Besided making my class more lively they promote a great amount of interaction and use of the target language. Some of the activities, which proved to be effective to promote speaking, can be found in the appendix.

4.5.1) DETECTIVE STORY At first I put the students in pairs. Then, I display photocopies of objects of various maps and pictures of people and places. The display can be random or the objects might be grouped and labelled as having been discovered at certain places and maps. These pictures represent detectives' evidence. The students must try to imagine what the connection between the objects might be and make up a detective's report or idea of what might have occurred. At the end they change their partners and each other tells his\her story to each other. Then, they compare the similarities and differences between the stories. If you want to involve the whole class you can ask the students to write down their stories and hang (all of) them on the wall. At end they vote for the best and interesting story.

4) POST STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

At the end of the project, the students were asked to rate the same aspects of their oral performance so that I could check whether their perceptions of their oral ability and vocabulary had changed.

1) How do you rate the quality of your vocabulary?

| students | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | | V | |
| 2 | | | V | |
| 3 | | | V | |
| 4 | | | V | |
| 5 | | V | | |
| 6 | | | V | |
| 7 | | | V | |
| 8 | | | V | |
| 9 | | V | | |
| 10 | | | V | |
| 11 | | | V | |
| 12 | | | V | |

2) How do you rate your oral performance?

| students | poor | average | good | excellent |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | | | V | |
| 2 | | | V | |
| 3 | | | V | |
| 4 | | | V | |
| 5 | | | V | |
| 6 | | | V | |
| 7 | | | V | |
| 8 | | | V | |
| 9 | | | V | |
| 10 | | | V | |
| 11 | | | V | |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 12 | | | V | |

By comparing the two tables, it is crystal clear that most of the students felt more confident about their vocabulary and oral skills. Only two students thought that their vocabulary was the same. They thought that they could only improve their oral performance in general. However, it is worth bearing in mind that there is no way of knowing whether the students were really sincere or they were giving me the answers that they thought I wanted to get. I may say that interest levels seemed to be high and that they seemed to have acquired more confidence. I believe that this confidence resulted from the great number of communication activities that they had had. By increasing their talking time in class, I helped them to increase their confidence that they were able to express their messages more fluently than before.

5) POST-TEST

By providing the same test at the end of the project my aim was simply to check whether they had had any gain or not. I knew that the vocabulary test would not give me much of information about their oral ability and whether their vocabulary had really improved since I could not rely entirely on the results. The fact that the students (at least some of them) could have not remembered all the 20 items was taken into consideration. They could have tried to mark some to the items randomly and consequently having the correct answers. However, the results suggest that there was a rate of increase if the two tests are compared.

| | BEFORE THE PROJECT | | AFTER THE PROJECT | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| students | right | wrong | right | wrong | gain |
| 1 | 11 | 9 | 15 | 5 | 4 |
| 2 | 12 | 8 | 15 | 5 | 3 |
| 3 | 7 | 13 | 12 | 8 | 5 |
| 4 | 10 | 10 | 13 | 7 | 3 |
| 5 | 9 | 11 | 14 | 6 | 5 |
| 6 | 13 | 7 | 15 | 5 | 2 |
| 7 | 13 | 7 | 16 | 4 | 3 |
| 8 | 9 | 11 | 14 | 6 | 5 |
| 9 | 9 | 11 | 15 | 5 | 6 |
| 10 | 9 | 11 | 13 | 7 | 4 |
| 11 | 9 | 11 | 16 | 4 | 7 |
| 12 | 10 | 10 | 15 | 5 | 5 |

These figures suggest that there was a retention of some words presented to them. All the students had better results in the second test. Certainly, natural occurances of given vocabulary items do not obey any rules, as it is a matter of speaker's choice, however, the results of this post-test suggest that the vocabulary items might be available to the students for use in natural communication

## 6) CONCLUSION

In the light of these results, it seems possible to say that the way this project was applied helped the students to internalize target items presented to them along the term. However, it is also known that it was probably not sufficient to develop learners' vocabulary and speaking skills. Students' oral improvement requires more than what has been developed in this project though I had a positive result by the end of the semester.

I know that it is not possible to establish a direct link between my classroom teaching and their retrieval of the new words for I did not cover a wide range of words in class. They may have picked them up from films, songs, readings as other sources. We, teachers, seem, rather, to act on the assumption that if we teach our students grammar, and reading and writing skills, they will build their vocabularies on their own as they engage in other activities.

Based on the positive result of this project, I believe, therefore, that vocabulary teaching must be included in any learning programme since early stages.

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